Introduction: For All

I pledge allegiance to the soil
of Turtle Island,
and to the beings who thereon dwell
one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun
With joyful interpenetration for all.

Freud concludes one of his last works, Civilization and its Discontents – which was published in 1930, the year of Gary Snyder’s birth – by announcing the prospect that ‘we may expect that one day someone will venture to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities’. Although Freud explicitly articulates earlier in the text that he will resist the urge to take the United States as his example – will avoid, that is, ‘the temptation of entering upon a critique of American civilization’ – what is undertaken here represents the venture Freud proposed sixty years ago.¹

This book presents my theory of American culture – how it is constituted as a culture, and what makes it specifically American. The theory has been developed as a consequence of my reading the poetry of Gary Snyder, a contemporary American poet. Snyder is thus the focus of this book not because his work represents a convenient canon to which the theory can be applied, nor yet even because his work exemplifies the theory, but rather because Snyder’s work has itself produced the theory in the sense that his poetry articulates most cogently what it means to speak to and for American culture today. Such a poetic stance is necessarily historical and political in that it implies an understanding of the origins and trajectory of American culture. Thus despite his Zen Buddhist practice, his decade of living in Japan and his extensive travels in India and the Pacific, Gary Snyder is quintessentially a poet of America. However, the stereotyping of Snyder’s work at the hands of the critics – as Beat, Orientalist, ecological and ‘merely’ political (that is, political at the expense of poetical) – has produced a situation in which students of American culture are apt to consider Snyder – if they consider his work at all – as marginal to what is

¹ T. Dean, Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious
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central and most important to the study of American literature and culture. This is a mistake whose effects my book attempts to redress. To refuse to recognise the importance of Snyder’s work is to participate in the maintenance of those American ideologies which Snyder more than any other writer can help us identify and assess.

My claim for Snyder’s importance extends beyond the question of American Studies/Cultural Studies, however, to claims for Snyder’s literary achievement. By this I mean that it would be possible to produce an account of why a certain cultural practice (such as poetry) might be important for an understanding of that culture without necessarily claiming any aesthetic value for the practice – indeed, some versions of cultural studies see cultural significance and aesthetic privilege as mutually exclusive. In other words, one could make the argument for Snyder as a culturally interesting writer without having to say that he was any good. This is not my claim. Instead, I shall also be demonstrating the achievement of Snyder’s poetic technique, the propensity of his work to exemplify aesthetically excellent craft as well as obtaining a significant bearing on the larger question of American culture in general.

What is often forgotten about the United States of America – although it is Snyder’s persistent concern, and anyone who has travelled around the States by means other than the air will be less apt to forget – is the fundamental importance of its land. The ‘land of opportunity’ is before anything else a land. America’s discovery in the fifteenth century (1492) posed a problem which it is difficult to overestimate, simply because ‘America’ was not supposed to be there. The shock was double, for not only was the giant continent in existence, but it was peopled too. What we know as the United States, therefore, came into being based on its destruction of the native inhabitants – the American Indians – and its expropriation of their home, the land. Because the European settlement of America began as a political and religious experiment intended to represent the pinnacle of civilisation and the morally best form of social organisation (the sense of self-conscious exemplarity expressed by John Winthrop’s description of it as ‘a city upon a hill’), the destruction upon which it was founded constitutes not just a paradox or a national embarrassment; rather, it constitutes something absolutely inadmissible to American consciousness. To be American, truly American, means not to know in a profound way